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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PPD
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/08/2019
TAGS: [PROP](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SARG CONTINUES TO CENSOR AND INTIMIDATE SYRIAN
MEDIA

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Despite 2001 amendments to Syria's archaic press law that precipitated the creation of a private media industry, the SARG still relies on censorship and intimidation to ensure the expanded number of publications does not threaten its control over information inside the country. Recent examples of censorship include the blockage of Syria Today's June edition, the firing of the producer at a privately-owned television station, the closure of privately owned al-Mashraq TV and the blockage of the latest edition of Shabablek. An expected update to the publications law, designed to assert greater authority over on-line media, may face considerable delays. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (C) In 2001, the SARG allowed private investors to purchase licenses to operate private media in the specific fields of culture, economics and business -- political media is, and remains, explicitly off limits. The change in media laws sparked a proliferation of private publications and generated wide-spread public dialogue on key economic and cultural issues. Signaling this policy remains in effect, a Ministry of Information (MOI) employee recently said applications for "politically-based media will not be favorably reviewed."

¶3. (C) Syrian journalists lament that, despite the proliferation of media outlets, government prohibitions ("red lines" are constantly shifting and represent a continuing occupational hazard). Local Dar al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi (strictly protect) said red lines were clearer under former President Hafez al-Asad, and journalists understood and respected them. While journalists today avoid obviously taboo subjects (the President, his father, national security issues and the military), there are myriad other, more nuanced issues that can endanger journalists or a news organization. Below are three specific examples that illustrate how the SARG seeks to influence media coverage and how three distinct news outlets handled it.

Syria Today: A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

¶4. (C) Syria Today, an English-language economic and business

magazine that was originally created by the First Lady's Syria Trust organization, has traditionally pushed the envelope, albeit under intense government scrutiny. Throughout its short history, Syria Today has proved able to tackle taboo subjects like the political opposition, economic reforms, media censorship, resource mismanagement, corruption, and the agricultural crisis with minimal blow-back from the government, principally because it is an English-language publication. John Dagge (strictly protect), Syria Today's editor-in-chief, said the Syrian government, in general, gives Syria Today a wider berth than Arabic-language media because it makes the government "look good" to have a magazine like Syria Today writing about controversial issues. But, Dagge said, every six to twelve months, the censors come down hard on the magazine. In one famous example, MOI blocked distribution of the June 2008 edition of the magazine because it featured a photo of democracy activist Riad Seif. The article questioned whether Syria's fractured political opposition merited the title of "opposition," but in the MOI view, it gave legitimacy to the opposition movement in Syria. (Note: Seif was jailed months before the issue hit magazine stands.)

15. (C) The MOI rejected the June 2009 edition for similar reasons. A picture of President Bashar al-Asad, which appeared underneath a quote by the King of Jordan, irked the censors. As a result, senior writer Dalia Haider (strictly protect) had to dissect the entire issue, word for word, with MOI officials. She eventually succeeded in getting the issue approved after the magazine agreed to reposition the President's photo to a more flattering location. Syria Today emerged from the harrowing experience chastened and more

carefully self-censoring, although still operational.

Satellite Channels: Under the SARG's Watchful Eye

16. (C) The SARG, which has complete control over the non-satellite TV airwaves, has sought to dominate Syria-specific satellite channels. In the case of the private al-Dounia satellite channel, Station Director Fuoad Shurbaji was fired, reportedly a victim of rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Post and al-Dounia had an excellent working relationship; their journalists filmed the concert of American Jazz Ambassador Ericka Ovette, interviewed U.S. speakers, and participated in Embassy round-tables. But during the December-January Gaza crisis, al-Dounia's news broadcasts took an openly anti-Saudi and anti-Egyptian line. In the aftermath of Asad's March reconciliation visit to Riyadh, al-Dounia announced Shurbanji's termination and station employees told us that station was charting a new course and would now be modeled on entertainment focused Lebanese channels. (Note: The antipathy felt by the Egyptian and Saudi governments over the Syrian media's treatment during the Gaza crisis lingers. Egyptian diplomats refuse to speak to Syrian journalists, and the Saudis did not allow any Syrian media to cover Asad's visit to Riyadh.) Shurbaji, a seasoned journalist highly regarded by his colleagues, was out of a job in a symbolic gesture to prove to the Saudis the SARG was taking steps to rehabilitate private media.

17. (C) Local security services shuttered Syrian-owned al-Mashraq TV on July 30, putting a decisive end to the station inside Syria. Owned by wealthy Syrian businessman Ghassan Aboud, al-Mashraq operated out of the UAE. The station was secular and liberal, and its programming tackled Syria-specific stories other stations would not. A recent report on liquor laws was cutting-edge by Syrian standards, particularly for its criticism that the government routed alcohol into predominantly Christian neighborhoods. In the first sign of trouble, the director of the station was fired by Aboud for "editorial differences," and the local staff responded by going on strike. The following day, security services prevented al-Mashraq film crews from shooting in the al-Sahliya market. When the employees tried to return to work after the one day strike, they were told the station was

closed and they should report to the security services. The stated reason was the channel had insulted "influential Syrians," but rumors persist that the owner rejected an offer to merge with a new station, reportedly financed by Rami Makhoul, President Assad's entrepreneurial cousin.

Controlling Internet Media

18. (C) For several years, the SARG, at the behest of the President, has been studying additional reforms to the press law to assert greater control over on-line media. According to the Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, responsibility for monitoring on-line media does not rest with the Ministry of Information, but rather with the Ministry of Interior. Reporting from websites buttresses this theory since the content on certain sites could only come from close relationships with the Syrian security services. A small group, including al-Watan Editor-in-Chief Waddah Abd Rabo and Bilal Turkmani, the son of the former defense minister and the owner of the monthly Abiyad wa Aswad, has been reviewing various drafts of the publications law. When asked about it recently, Abd Rabo said the latest draft has the Ministry of Commerce monitoring websites because of the advertising revenue, but he believed it was more likely the President will "forget" about the order and no additional action will be taken. Al-Watan is upgrading its website and hopes to capture revenue in on-line advertising.

Facebook: Less is More

19. (C) Facebook demonstrates the convergence of censorship on on-line and print media. The MOI blocked the most recent

issue of Shabablek youth magazine was because it featured an article criticizing the SARG's ban of Facebook. The article stated several prominent Syrian government officials, including the Minister of Culture, have Facebook profiles. Author Rafaa Hazaa (strictly protect) said the government feels increasingly threatened by Facebook as Syrians become active in organizing Facebook groups about controversial issues.

10. (C) Comment: New media sources in Syria chart a difficult course. Constantly aware they can be closed down by the SARG at any moment, they must sidestep incompetence at the MOI and SARG efforts to control the story line inside Syria. In this restrictive environment, savvy outlets find ways to placate the censors and stay in business, guaranteeing they will be around to cover the next big story.

HUNTER